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ABSTRACT

When English instructors functioning simultaneously as researchers study the reading and writing processes of their own students, it is important that they fully describe the context within which the study takes place and the effect that the dual instructional/research environment has on the participants, who are, similarly, functioning as both students and subjects. In a 1984 course on introspection in reading and writing processes, two instructors at Indiana University examined the various strategies graduate English and reading students used to respond to a range of teacher-designed and self-designed reading and writing tasks. Results indicated that students were extremely sensitive to their new role as research subjects. For some students, the desire to cooperate with the instructor's research seemed to overwhelm their normal behavior. Other students felt that the course's structure emphasized the research environment, causing them to be more conscious of their role as subjects. The overwhelming role that students played in the course was that of the "good graduate student." Less sophisticated students (e.g., those enrolled in the freshman composition classes) would probably exhibit, to some degree, the same behavior. (JD)

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The Dual Role of Student/Research Subject: Effect of Context on a Study of Reading and Writing

As instructors functioning simultaneously as researchers begin to study the reading and writing processes of their own students, it is important for them to describe fully the contexts within which such studies take place and especially the effect that the dual instructional/research environment has on the participants functioning simultaneously as students and subjects. As researchers, we have become increasingly sensitive to the need to supply as many elements from the context of our studies as we can so that our findings can be read and interpreted by our readers in as clear a manner as possible. Donald Spence made this need clear when he described a distinction between what he called normative competence and privileged compentence in reading a report. In normative competence, readers of reports base their interpretations on their own theoretical assumptions and personal experiences. In priviliged competence, researchers "unpack" their findings so that readers can be aware of the role of the researcher (who in our situation is often simultaneously the instructor) including the basis of providing input at transition points. What is less often taken into consideration is the effect of the context of these simultaneous instructional-research settings on our students who are aware that they also have dual roles in the setting--students and research subjects.

In a course on introspection in reading and writing processes at

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Indiana University in 1984, Sharon Pugh and I examined the varying strategies used by a group of graduate students in English and reading to respond to a range of teacher-designed and self-designed reading and writing tasks. We collected as research material the students' formal papers, journal accounts of their reading and writing processes, transcriptions of class meetings, and video-tapes of several of the class sessions. In addition, after I began to write descriptions and analyses of the students' experience in the seminar, I sent drafts of these materials to the students to comment on. Ten of the seventeen students in the seminar read and responded to these drafts.

Although our course in introspection was originally planned solely as a course in which our graduate students would examine their own reading and writing processes to become aware of their own strategies and the range of strategies used by their fellow graduate students, it quickly became clear to us that significant research information could be gathered by collecting the materials produced during these activities. And so, at the beginning of the semester, we asked the students if they would be willing to let us keep copies of their journals and papers, audio-tape all the class meetings, video-tape several of the classes, and use these materials in research reports that we would produce, keeping the identity of specific students confidential. The students readily agreed.

We were really not prepared for the effect that "being subjects" in a research study would have on our students. They were almost all at the point in their graduate studies when they were finishing their course work and beginning to prepare for their comprehensive examinations and dissertations. They were almost all simultaneously instructors of composition sections, reading and study skills courses, or associates on

research projects being carried out by faculty members. They were thus at various levels functioning as graduate students, teachers, and researchers themselves. These experiences made them extremely sensitive to their "new" role in the course, "student as research subject."

Just as their reading and writing strategies varied in their responses to the range of tasks provided in the semester, so did the stances they took in this role which seemed new to all of them. For some, the desire to "cooperate" with our research seemed to overwhelm what might have been their ordinary behavior. The most dramatic example of this was Jade, a reading graduate student, who strongly resisted the teacher-designed tasks at the beginning of the semester (a series of summary, reaction, synthesis tasks on readings on the topic of introspection). Jade told us in one of her early journals that she hated to write summaries, but then added, "but I want to cooperate." By the fourth class meeting, Jade was more direct about the effect that the research component was having on her. When the class was asked how it was that they felt comfortable enough to tell us how much they disliked the synthesis assignment but not comfortable enough not to do it, Jade responded quickly: "I know why I do that. It is solely due to the fact that this is research. [I would do anything] to help somebody else's research. That's all there is to it. For that reason, I've been doing it. If this was a regular class, I wouldn't do some of these things. But if you see yourself as a researcher, you would obviously help anyone else who was a researcher."

Two years later, when she read a draft of my manuscript, Jade told me that she had come into the course expecting it to be a research methodology course. She had expected to learn how to use introspection techniques for her own research purposes. When it became clear to her that

the course was designed for the participants to study their own processes rather than the processes of others, she apparently threw herself into the role of subject as a substitute for being able to do the research herself. But she never shared these expectations with us while the course was going on, and we were often puzzled by her simultaneous belligerent-cooperative stance. She also told me that she had never considered the idea of dropping the course, but that the change in roles that she had to play had been disappointing to her because she had even had a tentative research design of her own formulated.

Although this is a particularly dramatic example of the effect of being a research subject, it points up several implications for research worthwhile to note. First, the dual roles had an effect in changing the normal behavior patterns for this student. Rather than refusing to undertake tasks she disliked, she complied with them. Secondly, the reasons for her behavior and attitudes were completely unknown while the course was going on and even after it was completed. Only two years later, in reviewing my ("the researcher's") analysis, did the student reveal her prior expectations and their effect on her.

Other students in the class also responded strongly to the research aspect of the course. Garnet, another reading student, believed that the way we structured the course affected the students' roles as simultaneous students-research subjects. We had decided to reveal the reading and writing tasks week-by-week and in the early weeks of the semester forbide collaboration among the students. We had made these decisions from an instructional perspective, wanting the students to explore their strategies independently at first, and only to share their processes and problems with each other at the class meetings or after each had individually completed

the task for that week. It soon became clear that we were seriously disrupting the strong social network of learning that exists among graduate student communities and the students strongly resisted these injunctions on our part. We decided to keep them in place during the part of the semester that the students were working on the teacher-designed tasks so that the students could later compare their experiences under such constraints with their experiences later in the semester when they would be working on self-designed projects and no restrictions on collaboration would exist.

But this structure, at least for some, seemed to emphasize a research environment and it made them more conscious of their roles as research subjects since, as they privately discussed it among themselves, they came to believe that we had made such decisions to "control" the variables in the research. We had, in fact, looked upon the experience as ethnographic in nature, and the restriction on early collaboration was the only condition we introduced in the course. However, it was a powerful enough restriction for some of the reading students to see it as a dominating factor in the early weeks of the semester.

After reading a draft of my manuscript, Garnet noted that our not providing an initial overview of the course had made the students more dependent on us than was usual and contributed to a research-type atmosphere in the course. She said,

> I know that a number of us did focus more on the class as research, as you needing to learn more about us, rather than we learning more about our own processes...I think this was influenced by the way the course began. Only being told assignments one week in advance and not being able to talk to each other seemed

> like research manipulations and so I and others responded to it as research. I am still unsure whether the reason behind these two directives was based on the course learning goals or were due to research methodology. Either way, I do know that these directives focused my attention on the class as research rather than on it as a way to learn more about myself. As time went on, my focus did shift to what I was learning about my own processing and the processing of others. However, I was always aware of the research focus.

Admittedly, students like Garnet are especially sensitive to designs of research studies and will respond more acutely to what they perceive as research manipulations. In fact, more of the reading students seemed to react strongly to the research component of the course than the English students, perhaps because a great deal of their work in the School of Education had introduced them to varieties of research design. The only English students in the course who had even taken a research course were those majoring in rhetoric and composition, and they constituted only three of the eight English students in the course. But even less sophisticated students may find themselves questioning whether instructional goals are being subverted by research goals. And surely such conflicts would arise to a much greater degree in instructional settings where the control and manipulation of variables become central to the research design.

I don't want to overstate the effect of this dual role of student-research subject though. The overwhelming role that the students played in the course was "good graduate student," as Robin, one of the English students observed. Another of the English graduate students, Chip, even commented that at the time of the course, although he wanted to help with

the research, he felt that some of the students were over-reacting to the research element. For example, when the students were asked to summarize a science-fiction story that could be read on multiple levels, many were perplexed about how to handle the assignment. Their personnas as "good graduate students" quickly emerged. Garnet spoke for many when she said that she didn't want to summarize just the plot and be perceived of as a "dummy"; in other words, the classroom setting seemed to demand that she "come up with the meaning." Although the research aspect did seem to influence their behavior, particularly at the beginning of the semester, their behavior as students in a graduate seminar dominated overall.

Some of the students resisted the pull of the research component, Pearl, a reading student, for example, acknowledged that her work might be "data" in a research study, but she quickly decided that she was allowed to shape the work to fit her own agenda.

At the beginning of the fifth class meeting, Sharon Pugh, my colleague and team-teacher, presented some summarizing descriptive statements about what we had been finding in the journals thus far. She noted that there had been some journal entries geared very specifically to us in relation to our data-gathering attempts and other journal entries geared very much to the individual writers. For those who had decided that we were the primary audience for the journals, there was a sense that they were trying to provide us with what they thought would be useful to us.

Although this population of sophisticated graduate students whose reading and writing processes were being documented and described may seem a far cry from the less sophisticated students in our freshman composition classes, I would argue that their behavior is only different from our freshmen and other undergraduates in matters of degree. Our

undergraduates are trying to be "good students;" they are trying to "give us what we want" and if they perceive that there are research goals behind the instructional goals we have identified for them, they will also try to behave like "good research subjects."

Our graduate students were almost all sufficiently sophisticated and motivated to cast off their roles as research subjects within a few weeks and establish their own learning goals for the course. But I am doubtful that many undergraduates, particularly freshmen, can shrug this element off so easily.

It is clear that some of the contextual factors in this study were facilitating and some were inhibiting. What we as researchers must do is be extremely candid about what the research context is in all its manifold complex dimensions and try to assess the effects that these contextual factors have not only on the behavior of our students but on the responses they make to varying tasks and how these responses have to a greater or lesser degree been affected by the context. Only then will we be able to evaluate the significance of the coping strategies that our students adopt to the contexts within which we are studying their processes. Only then will we begin to be able to make recommendations about shaping contexts that will draw on the strengths we can identify and decrease the impact of the limiting factors.